Chambers' Homosexuality Told

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Whittaker Chambers, the onetime Communist agent whose testimony sent Alger Hiss to jail in 1950, voluntarily admitted to the FBI that he had been a homosexual.

Chambers told his story in detail to federal agents in February, 1949, because he feared Hiss' defense lawyers would uncover his homosexual activity and use it to discredit him when he testified against Hiss in a perjury trial that year.

"I tell it now only because, in this case, I stand for truth," Chambers wrote in a statement that he handed to FBI agents in a sealed envelope. "Having testified mercilessly against others, it has become my function to testify mercilessly against myself."

His secret was kept 27 years until it surfaced this week among papers made public as a result of a suit under the Freedom of Information Act. It is among a small batch of documents the FBI had maintained were exempt under the act and did not have to be made public. Deputy Attorney General Harold R. Tyler ruled the papers were relevant to the Hiss case and ordered them released.

Chambers, who died in 1961, was a Communist spy in the 1930s, funneling documents stolen in Washington to a Soviet agent in New York City. In 1948, he identified Hiss, a former State Department official, as one source of the documents.

Hiss was convicted of perjury for saying he never knew Chambers and never passed documents to him. He has maintained his innocence.

Chambers, who was to be the government's key witness against Hiss, was being interviewed almost daily in New York by FBI agents in February, 1949, when he decided to unfold the story of his homosexual encounters, which ceased, he said, in 1938 when he broke with the Communist Party.

After one lengthy interview on Feb. 15, 1949, Chambers handed agents an envelope containing a dramatically worded admission of his homosexual life, which even his wife knew nothing about.

"The Hiss forces, of course, will seek to prove that my weakness entered into my relations with Alger Hiss and possibly others," Chambers wrote. "This is completely untrue. At no time did I have such relations, or ever the thought of such relations, with Hiss or with anybody else in the Communist Party or connected with Communist work of any kind. I kept my secret as jealously from my associates in the C. P. as I did from everyone else."

Chambers' homosexuality never surfaced in the trial, but both he and the FBI heard reports that the Hiss defense hoped to use it to impeach his testimony in the trial, the papers show.

The defense attempted to discredit him on other grounds, including his lies to a congressional committee, his long career as a secret Soviet agent, and an extramarital affair with a woman.

The FBI also had picked up reports through an informant that the Hiss defense might attempt to show that Chambers had had a homosexual relationship with Hiss' stepson and that through this relationship had gained access to a typewriter used to copy 64 stolen State Department documents.

The Woodstock typewriter had been in Hiss' Georgetown home during the 1930s. At the trial, it was shown to be the one on which the documents were typed and became one of the government's major pieces of evidence against Hiss.

One authority on the Hiss-Chambers case believes release of the FBI papers will establish Chambers as a more credible witness in the eyes of historians.

Allen Weinstein, a Smith College professor who is completing a book on the case, said: "If Chambers was willing to acknowledge to the FBI those painful memories, does it not add to his overall credibility as a witness? I think that it does."

Chambers, in his statement to the FBI, said that his first physical homosexual affair was in 1933 or 1934 with a young man he met in New York.

"For three or four years, I fought a wavering battle against this affliction," he wrote. "Ten years or more ago, with God's help, I absolutely conquered it. This does not mean that I am completely immune to such stimuli. It does mean that my self-control is complete and that for years I have lived a blameless and devoted life as husband and father."

WHITTAKER CHAMBERS
. . .revealed past to FBI

Chambers, in subsequent interviews summarized by the FBI, said he never had had an enduring homosexual relationship but had engaged in "numerous homosexual activities" in New York and Washington. "I generally went to parks or other parts of town where these people were likely to be found," he said.

Chambers said that either in pretrial depositions or in open court "in all probability this subject matter will be brought to light. I contemplate, therefore, telling my attorneys of this situation and, although it will be an unpleasant task, it will be necessary to inform my wife of this."